

JASON GOWANS, THE PLOT

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An inky desert backdrop. An enigmatic phrase. A shimmering constellation that charts one thing, or perhaps another, and that disappears with a step, like a mirage. The elements of *The Plot* could well be the framework for a noir film. And indeed, in this series of new works, Jason Gowans navigates a shadowy and seductive set of coordinates. They intersect powerfully, if obliquely, in our collective imaginary, conjuring up specific histories from the past century—cinematic, artistic, and military—in and of the southwestern United States. These are histories that have crystallized in and through the photograph, that shifting set of technologies and object forms persistent in their ability to both define our ways of seeing and haunt the peripheries of our present.

Gowans' practice has consistently queried photography's role in the construction of cultural meaning, particularly with regard to western constructs of landscape. A recent relocation from Vancouver to Los Angeles—the "most photographed and least remembered city in the world"ⁱ—has offered the artist a new site from which to direct these investigations. Always present in this new body of works, if not always visible, is the desert. The site *par excellence* of cold war paranoia and conspiracy theory, the desert operated throughout the twentieth century as a theatre of both the natural and technological sublime. It is a place where meaning falls apart: "a place without language," to quote Rebecca Solnit, "to some extent unnamed, unmapped, unfamiliar, corresponding to no familiar categories of experience. [It is a place] not truly outside representation, but challenging to it."ⁱⁱ In its perceived emptiness, the desert offered the ideal stage whereupon humankind could rehearse the apocalypse of civilization—the end of all meaning—through the testing of atomic weaponry. For not dissimilar reasons, the desert was also a lure for the modernist artistic imagination. A place of escape, of cleansing, of absolute truths and absolute autonomy, of physical purity and impossible magnitude (I am thinking here of the work of Ansel Adams and Georgia O'Keefe, but also that of Robert Smithson, Nancy Holzer, Michael Heizer, and Walter de Maria). The desert sharpens perception and obliterates it. It offers no frame of reference (remember also the compositions of Vija Celmins and Agnes Martin). When the desert appears in Gowans' photographs, it is similarly brutal; an inescapable field of textured rock, tight against the picture plane, shrouded in ominous shadow. At once empty and full, it reveals nothing.ⁱⁱⁱ

The darkness of these images feels somehow cinematic, and in fact Gowans has employed an approach favoured by early filmmakers to simulate night scenes while filming in daylight.^{iv} But their twilight also places the photographs within another, related visual language, that of film noir. A genre that emerged in America within a climate of post-war disillusionment, film noir is recognizable for its hard-boiled characters and seedy settings, its bleak storytelling (particularly in the context of the early cold war), and its striking aesthetic—thanks to the influx of Central and Eastern European filmmakers to Hollywood in the 1930s, who brought the

influence of German Expressionist film—of dramatic shadows, oblique and vertical lines, and irregular light patterns.

While darkness pervades *The Plot*, it does not register as the mere absence of light, but rather as a marked presence, an objecthood. Always for Gowans, the photograph is as much sculpture as image.^v Prints curl away from the wall. Large-scale transparencies are propped on fabricated cinder blocks, throwing projections on the wall behind (they at once are images and devices to project them). Lightboxes are fitted with black Plexiglas that as much obscures light as emits it, not only demanding the presence of a viewing body but quite literally reflecting its presence. One might also argue that in Gowans' work, photographic processes—whether obsolescent or current—assert themselves in the physical present too, not so much as techniques but as matter.

"For the materialist historian," Walter Benjamin writes in *The Arcades Project*, "every epoch with which he occupies himself is only a fore-history of that which really concerns him."^{vi} Benjamin's primary concern was with unmasking the myths of modernity, and he understood photography to be a powerful vehicle through which the past could address the present. Perhaps, as Gowans seems to suggest, it is only in the refraction of these histories, sites, and narratives, intelligible through their sensuous visual residue, that a means of approaching our own seemingly unfocusable conditions can come, however dimly, into view.

Notes

ⁱ Norman Klein, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (London and New York: Verso, 1997). See in particular Chapter 10 (247–262).

ⁱⁱ Rebecca Solnit, "Scapeland," in Anne Wilkes Tucker, Richard Misrach and Rebecca Solnit, *Crimes and Splendors: The Desert Cantos of Richard Misrach*, (Boston: Bullinck Press, 1996), 43.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Center for Land Use Interpretation has documented (via Google Earth) a strange series of black-and-white graphics painted on the surface of the remote desert across a number of states: called photo-calibration targets, these aerial test patterns were designed to measure and calibrate aerial cameras on spy planes from the era of analog photography. Reducing the three-dimensional landscape to a two-dimensional pattern—an abstract modernist canvas of sort—they were a means to focus on the unfocusable. While these terrestrial test patterns should be obsolete, they appear familiar, as part of our own current visual vernacular and collective psychology in an era of drone surveillance and desert warfare. See <http://www.clui.org/newsletter/winter-2013/photo-calibration-targets>

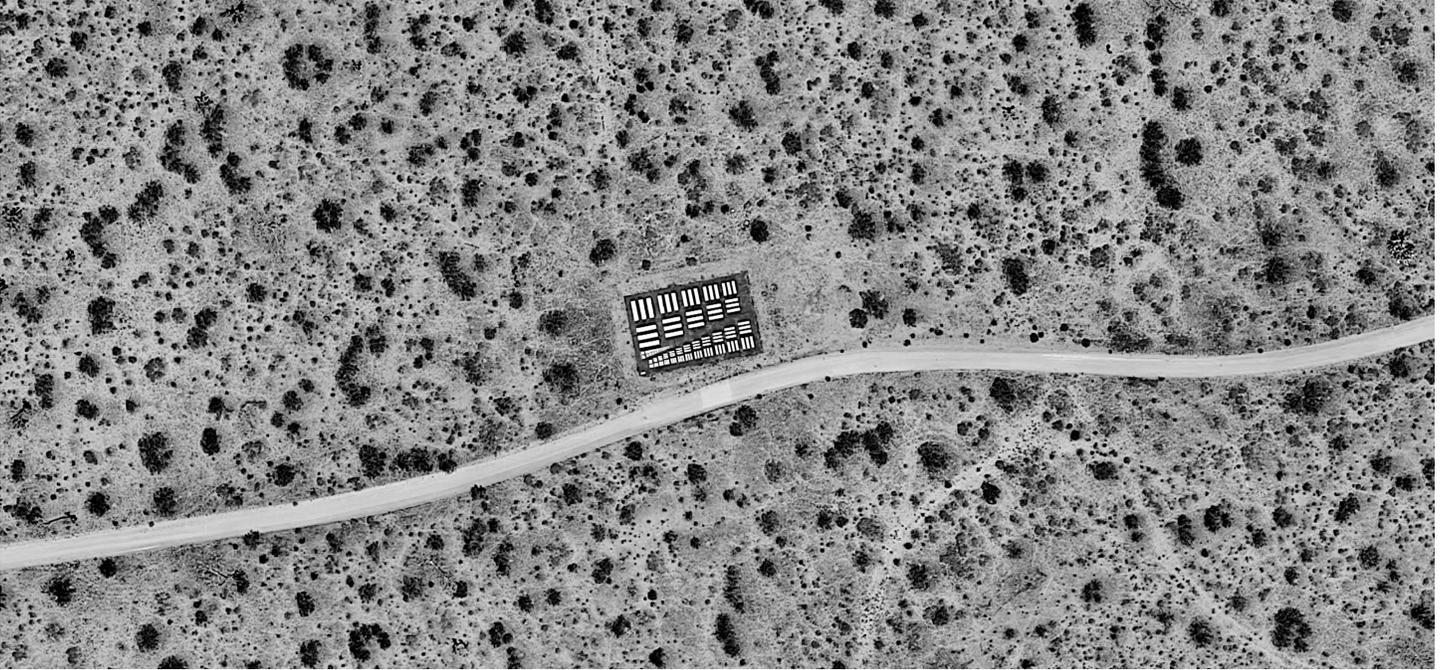
^{iv} The "day for night" technique, as its known, is largely obsolescent today given advancements in the light sensitivity of film and video equipment.

^v See, for example, Gowans' 2012 series *Five Landscape Modes*.

^{vi} Quoted in Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), xii.

Jason Gowans (b. 1981, Kelowna Canada) lives and work in Los Angeles. He is currently pursuing an MFA at University of California, Irvine, and received a BFA in photography at Concordia University in Montreal. He was co-founder of both Gallery 295 in Vancouver, and The Everything Company art collective.

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Google Earth image, from research by The Center for Land Use Interpretation
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